

Obituaries

Howell Begle, lawyer who championed penniless R&B stars, dies at 74

By Emily Langer

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Ruth Brown was a chart-topping rhythm-and-blues singer whose popularity in the 1950s brought her label, Atlantic Records, a reputation as “the house that Ruth built.” Years later, scraping by as a domestic, she heard a familiar sound on the air. “I turned on the radio while I was scrubbing,” she recalled, “and I heard my records come on.”

Like many artists from R&B’s original heyday in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s, Brown — remembered for numbers such as “[\(Mama\) He Treats Your Daughter Mean](#)” and “[Teardrops From My Eyes](#)” — was a victim of what ABC News once declared the “dirty little secret of the music business.” Through skewed contracts and sloppy bookkeeping, record companies reaped the profits of original R&B sales and subsequent reissues while leaving performers, many of whom were African American, in poverty.

“Where’s the check?” Brown demanded to know.

In 1983, she found a champion in Howell E. Begle, then a partner in a Washington law firm and a boyhood fan of her music who by then had amassed a library of old 78s — many of them Brown’s recordings — numbering in the thousands.

During a years-long pro bono legal fight, Mr. Begle represented Brown and other R&B artists, helping them claim royalties from past sales, industry-standard royalty agreements going forward, and other benefits in what became known as the royalty reform movement.

Mr. Begle, 74, died Dec. 30 at a hospital in Lebanon, N.H., of injuries he sustained in a skiing accident a week earlier. His wife, Julie Eilber, confirmed his death.

Mr. Begle — “Begle, the legal eagle,” as Brown called him — specialized in newspaper acquisitions and other areas of media law but was best known for his work on behalf of the R&B artists whose music he so admired. He had seen Brown perform for the first time when he was 11, met her through a client and was aghast at the circumstances in which she and many other musicians found themselves.

“He had albums of mine that he wanted me to sign. They were, he said, very expensive. I told him I didn’t get a cent of the money. I hadn’t had a royalty statement in decades,” Brown told the San Francisco Chronicle in 1990. Mr. Begle’s reply: “You can’t be serious.”

R&B musicians from Brown's era were often poorly represented, if they were represented at all, when they began their careers. They were sometimes paid as little as \$50 a song or royalties of 1 percent — a pittance compared with the 10 percent rate that became the industry standard.

In addition, decades after they stopped performing, many of them still owed money to the companies for recording and other costs. The musicians often had little savings and no health insurance. Some could not cover their own funeral expenses.

Besides Brown, Mr. Begle took on musicians including Big Joe Turner, the Drifters, the Coasters, the Clovers, and Sam and Dave. He helped turn public opinion in his clients' favor by placing Brown and Turner, who by the 1980s was on dialysis, on the CBS newsmagazine "West 57th." Brown appeared before Congress. The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson joined discussions with record companies, protesting what he viewed as "racially exclusive, insensitive and economically exploitative policies."

"I used every resource I had," Mr. Begle told The Washington Post in 1988.

Beginning that year, Atlantic Records announced a series of changes benefiting its former musicians. It paid more than \$1 million in back royalties to 35 acts, raised royalty payments going forward, and eliminated many debts assigned to performers. Many other record companies made similar moves.

Atlantic Records also contributed \$2 million for the establishment of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation, a Washington-based organization that makes grants to struggling R&B musicians. Mr. Begle was its first executive director.

"It was a travesty to me that so many artists I love and throughout my record collection never got any payments for the millions they sold," singer Bonnie Raitt, a founding board member of the organization, said in a statement. "Looking back at Howell's contribution, he will always be a hero to me for his tireless work on behalf of these pioneer artists working to get them the royalties and recognition they so deserve."

Brown, who died in 2006, received \$20,000 and was forgiven all "debts" by Atlantic.

Howell Edward Begle Jr. was born in Detroit on Jan. 4, 1944. His mother worked in sales, and his father was a businessman. After his parents divorced, he grew up in Arizona and later in the South, playing the guitar in high school.

He received a bachelor's degree in 1965 from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., before receiving a law degree from the University of Michigan in 1968. He became a partner in the Washington firm Verner, Liipfert, Bernhard, McPherson and Hand and left in 1987 to join Johnson and Swanson, continuing his pro bono legal work on behalf of the musicians. He later returned to Verner, Liipfert.

In recent years he practiced law as president of Howell Begle and Associates, based at his home in Boston, where he moved after living in Washington for several decades. He handled legal issues for the Kennedy Center

Honors and American Film Institute tributes, as well as the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures scheduled to open in 2019, his wife said.

A complete list of survivors was not immediately available.

“To have gone to law school, worked for a Wall Street law firm, to have acquired all these skills and to have an opportunity later in life to apply these things to something I loved is wonderful,” Mr. Begle told The Post in 1988, reflecting on his work for royalty reform. “Too often in one’s professional career, you don’t get a chance to be on the right side of the right issue.”

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Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. She writes about extraordinary lives in national and international affairs, science and the arts, sports, culture, and beyond. She previously worked for the Outlook and Local Living sections. Follow [Twitter](#)

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